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US erred on basics in Iran contacts

Agreeing to arms sales seen as serious miscalculation in age-old game of covert deals

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There are time-tested rules to the game of establishing secret contacts with one's enemy, as the United States sought to do with Iran. There are also many dangers, all of which were present in spades during the Iran operation.

First, dedicated opposition to the contacts in both countries is assured, and complete secrecy is inherently impossible. Thus, anticipating such reaction is essential.

Many people must become involved if the kind of basic policy changes envisaged by such extraordinary procedures are to be realized. A number of these people will feel threatened by the initiative and attempt to sabotage it. In the case of Iran, hostile leaks to a Syrian-controlled journal in

Lebanon created the initial furor. In Washington, key players in both the Congress and the

State Department were not involved in the operation - and are now reacting accordingly.

Second, the parties to such a covert contact almost never trust each other initially. A process of testing and probing for indications of good faith - including attempts to place the other side in a position of vulnerability - inevitably becomes part and parcel of the process. In Iran, the American probe apparently included a request for the release of hostages. This undoubtedly exposed those Iranians involved to radicals' attacks. Accordingly, the Iranian side requested arms.

To stop short of complying with compromising requests while reinforcing mutual trust is an art. Those who have not mastered it can easily err by acquiescing. The Reagan administration seems to have failed badly in this case.

Third, operations such as the one with Iran are heady affairs for those involved. Objective criticism is sparse because such operations are so restricted. And the prospects of a smashing political success often encourage a gambler's mentality. In such an environment, pressures to push one's luck a little further are high.

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Fourth, the intelligence base on which covert contacts depend is almost always insufficient. Rarely does it give a reliable picture of the complex elements at play in the opposing camp.

In the recent Iran episode, a satisfactory intelligence base would have required an independent penetration of Iran's radicals; of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's loyalists, whatever their political inclination; and of the so-called moderate elements. Inevitably, the group being contacted - in this case the moderates - will insist they have their opposition adequately covered. Experience teaches that this is rarely the case.

Finally, third parties providing good offices for such enterprises inevitably have their own agendas - which they may sincerely believe are in the interests of all parties concerned. Israel's desires to debilitate its Arab enemies and, in the process, to strengthen strategic collaboration with the US are obvious elements in the Iran equation. They may overlap with Washington's interests, but are not necessarily consonant with them.

This is not to say that secret contacts are not at times worth the inherent risks. Such methods of operation are essential arrows in the quivers of most modern states. By use of such tools, disputes are sometimes negotiated, as in the case of initial US-Vietnam contacts; hostilities damped, as has reportedly happened over the years between Jordan and Israel; and relationships renewed, as in the case of Peking and Washington. They may yet prove positive in the case of Iran.

But the pitfalls are many.

One point bears making in the current climate. Symbolic weapons deliveries are the good-faith indicator of choice for almost all third-world revolutionaries.

Perhaps in the future, compliance with weapons-related requests should be ruled out in advance and this fact made known to potential clandestine interlocutors. Such a procedure, however, would not be easy to enforce when dealing in a violence-prone world, where arms have nearly achieved the status of currency.

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